

## Matthew 11:2-15 – Advent 3 – Advent in Jail – December 11, 2022

+In Nomine Iesu+

Our Gospel account might not be exactly what we are expecting today. It is Advent. We are preparing for the Nativity. And it is the third week of Advent when we focus on joy. And we have this story about John the Baptist—who is in prison—who sends his followers to Jesus with a question. “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Now, I do think this is an important story for Advent. Remember that Advent means *coming*. And so we think of all the ways in which Jesus comes to us. And we find this kind of language in our reading—especially in John’s question. But let me back up just a little in the narrative about Christ. Let’s start with Simeon from Luke chapter two.

We sing his *Nunc Dimittis* in our sacramental liturgy—a little bit of Christmas every week. But, there is a lot of mystery surrounding this man—who he was—how old he is—why he is at the temple. Forty days after Jesus’ birth, the holy family arrives at the temple, to present Jesus before the Lord.

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”

So many questions swirl around him. How did He know that Jesus was coming? What does it mean that He came to the temple that day in the Spirit? But here he is. And he has a word from the Lord for this Holy Family. And he says, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Of all things, this is what Simeon said about the Christ Child. And this will be confirmed in the opposition that Jesus faces—even from His earliest days—from Herod, from the Pharisees, from Rome, and from the hearts of those all around Him.

This will also be confirmed as He preaches and invites others into God’s kingdom. And so, we bring Simeon’s words into our reading in Matthew 11. Here, the crowds are enormous. People came from nearby Jerusalem. But people came from the coasts of the Mediterranean—from Tyre and Sidon as well. Between the preaching of John the Baptist and the preaching of Christ, something like this had never happened before. It was a religious revival, of sorts, unique in the history of God’s people.

But there is a certain tension that Jesus brings as He comes. He is “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” He causes everyone to pick a side. John had come before Him to prepare the way. Everyone heard John’s preaching. Everyone saw the remarkable things that were happening.

And no one could miss the power and authority in all that Jesus did. The blind received sight. The lame walked. Lepers were cleansed. And thus, everything He said and did was laced with God’s authority. He called for faith. He called for repentance. He called for obedience. What would they do with this Jesus?

Now, when we look at John the Baptist in this passage, we find him imprisoned by Herod. Matthew gives us a little more of the detail in chapter 14. John was in prison for

telling the truth. He had confronted Herod's open sin. And it was sexual sin. It is hard to admit that we have done wrong—that we are wrong.

Now John had no worldly power here. He merely reveals what everyone already knows. There is just the wickedness of Herod—and the bold reproof of John. A wicked man needs no other tormentor than his own heart. Conscience can even make a king miserable. And Herod finds it easier to silence the preacher than repent of his sins. Although, interestingly, before he has John executed. He goes and talks with John.

Anyway, from prison, John sends a message to Jesus. Now, they had some history. We know that they are related—and not just shirt-tale relations. Mary spends much of her pregnancy with Elizabeth and Zechariah—John's parents—away from the light of critical eyes. Undoubtedly, Mary's pregnancy was controversial. People talk—especially when they don't know what they are talking about.

John first recognizes Jesus while still in the womb. He is filled with the Holy Spirit at Jesus' presence. So is his mother. Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

From this extraordinary beginning, we find John preparing the way for the coming of Christ. We talked about this a little last week. He comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. He preaches repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He hails Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He baptizes Jesus. And with this Baptism Jesus is sent out to bring the kingdom of God.

And, we even know from prison that John heard all about Christ. In prison, John receives news from his disciples. And even in prison, he continued his work of preparing the way for Jesus. He intends his devoted followers become Jesus' devoted followers. We know that happens with Andrew—Simon Peter's brother. And this might also be the case with John the Evangelist. And he revealed to them all that God had revealed to him.

Now, the message that John sends to Jesus has troubled Christians for years. "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The discussion centers on the question of whether we find doubt in John while in prison. Maybe it is how we would feel in such circumstances. Maybe it is how we feel now. Unsure if Jesus is really all He claims to be. Maybe we wonder if all of this really matters at all.

No doubt, John was aware that his ministry was coming to an end. His experience as a Prophet landed him in prison. And prison is no great place to be. The conspiracy to take his life is already in the mind of Herodias. But the question gives us some insight into John's purpose.

With this question, John asks if Jesus is the *One who is to come*. And surely this is an inquiry into Jesus' identity as the Messiah. This is not the first time that John has used such language. In Matthew 3, our reading last week, he says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but *he who is coming* after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." This designation is derived

from Psalm 118 which we heard on the first week of Advent, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!”

So, this title means so much more than just one who comes on the scene in the marketplace. It is full of anticipation and expectation for the One who would bring salvation—the One who would bring about the kingdom of God—the One who would set the captives free.

But, I believe, the fact that John sends his disciples *to Jesus*—for an answer—actually proves John’s faith in Jesus. He doesn’t doubt. He does this for his disciples. So that they would know the Savior coming into the world. He does what he does for us as well. Maybe we would feel a little better about ourselves and our doubts, if John had not been so faithful. But that just isn’t the case in this text.

John is a Prophet. The greatest of the Prophets. And although we get to see some of the struggles of the Prophets—Jeremiah and Jonah come to mind—John is not some reed shaken by the wind. James says, “The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” According to Jesus, this doesn’t describe John at all.

Now, perhaps we can imagine that John does still have questions. Asking questions of Jesus is not the same as doubting Jesus. John had predicted that Jesus would come with judgment against His enemies. In our reading last week, we hear “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Perhaps John wondered about God’s timing. Things are getting urgent for him. Why God’s just judgment against sin—against Herod—did not come to deliver him. Where were the swinging of the axe and the fires of wrath? Maybe he doesn’t fully grasp the difference between the time of grace and the time of judgment. I get that. But He doesn’t doubt that Jesus is the coming Messiah.

John’s very purpose was to point people to Jesus. He had seen the Lord’s Christ—face to face. And he sent his followers to “hear and see” for themselves. That’s why Jesus answers the way He does. And Jesus commends John even while He promises greater blessings to come.

Of course, John is not perfect. Much like Mary, Jesus is his Savior too. But maybe this tendency to find doubt in John reveals something more about ourselves. We aren’t the first to criticize him. His preaching had always been divisive. Last week we heard that the Pharisees and Sadducees had gone out to witness John’s preaching. They will do the same with Jesus. But they go simply to find fault. As Simeon predicted, Jesus Himself is the sign that is opposed.

John the Baptist came preaching repentance. His life is that of a Nazarene and a Prophet. He is ascetic. He is not drinking wine. He is not attending all of the Christmas parties. He withdraws from society. He doesn’t do what the culture expects of him. And so, they find fault with him. He is rejected as one from the devil himself.

In contrast—at least from their perspective—Jesus comes with grace for sinners. He preaches the Gospel. And He accepts the invitations to eat at the table with those of

questionable character—the tax collectors and sinners. And are His critics satisfied? No. They find fault again. They accuse him of drunkenness and gluttony and bad company.

Both John and Jesus—in their own ways—refuse to do what the world demands of them. And when things don't go the way the crowd expects—as unreasonable as all of this is—they find every reason in the world to not believe in Christ.

After all, what does the Scripture say? Romans 8, “The sinful mind is hostile to God.” And 1 Corinthians 2, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” The thoughts of our hearts are revealed by the coming of Jesus Christ.

So, what are the thoughts of your hearts? Maybe we are not thinking about much at all. And if that is the case, let me call on you—with Mary—to ponder all of these things in your hearts. In listening to John—in listening to Jesus—to see all that God is doing through them—we find God's Word's Word working on our hearts—calling us to faith—pointing us to eternal issues. We may still have questions. And questions are always welcome. But the Word of God washes away our doubts.

Now, maybe this Advent season finds you feeling a little like John the Baptist. Maybe you find yourself in some kind of jail—hopefully a metaphorical jail rather than a real one. But either way, don't let this be a season of doubt for you. Don't give into the world's criticisms. Don't let the problems of the world keep you from the only solution. Follow John's advice as he points you to the coming of your Savior. Believe in your heart. Get caught up in the wonder of this story.

It is as Jesus says in response to John's question, and here is our answer too, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*